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The Japanese sword is considered to have virtually no parallel in any other form of art made of iron. In the sword, we can see the aesthetic and racial spirit of the Japanese ancestry. The belief that each sword was an extension of its owner, that each blade held a soul that was linked to its owner in some spiritual way, is apparent in how the sword's owner cared for its upkeep. And how it served and protected him in combat.

Japanese mythology has it that the deities of heaven presented to Amaterasu Omikami, the sun goddess, the three Imperial Regalia. These regalia consisted of curved jewels, a holy

mirror and the sacred sword. This sword had been removed from the tail of the dragon Yamata No Orochi by Amaterasu's brother, Susanoo No Mikito and presented to his sister with the name of Kusanagi. Amaterasu entrusted the Imperial Regalia to her grandson when he descended to the Japanese Islands. These Imperial Regalia are said to have passed from emperor to emperor until the 9th century when replica were made for the Emperor to keep in his possession and the originals were placed at various shrines. The complete name of the Imperial sword is Kusanagi No Tsurugi which means "grass parting two-edged straight blade."

Sword Construction

The Japanese Swordsmiths, called Toshyo, sought to instill three attributes in the crafting of their weapons: unsnappablity, rigidity, and cutting power. This presented somewhat of a dilemma: In a sword unsnappablity requires soft iron, rigidity requires a harder iron as does cutting power. If the iron is soft it will not cut well and if it is

hard is will break easily. The combination of these three contradictory elements seemed almost impossible. The fact that the Japanese smiths were able to overcome these great obstacles and forge some of the most unique swords ever is a credit to their genius. It's interesting to know that most notable swordsmiths had personal methods and "secret" traditions regarding the processes of crafting these great weapons.

The construction of the sword begins with a bubbly molten iron-sand called Tamahagane. It is a very impure metal

and it requires about 21 lbs of this material to create one 4 lb sword (a loss of about 81%). This metal is very expensive, and less skilled Toshiyo would require even more of it to create a sword, thus resulting in even higher construction costs, due to the waste created by these lesser smiths. After the tamahagane has been heated and quenched, it is broken into small pieces so that its quality can be judged.

The tamahagane is then squeezed in a process called Tamatsubushi. The bits of the metal are piled with clay water and lye. Then it is heated evenly until it is in

a plasticity state and squeezed until all of the bubbles and most of the impurities are squeezed out.

Once this process is completed, the steel is now ready for the forging process, or Uwagitae. The steel is cut and folded and reforged over and over again to create a superior elasticity and temper of the steel. It is critical at this stage, that the temperature of the metal be exact as improper temperatures (either too high or too low) will weaken the blade.

The blade of the katana is actually

comprised of 3 different types of steel, Kawagane steel which comprises the outer skin, a soft, elastic steel called Shingane, which makes up the central part of the blade and high tempered, durable Hagane steel which is used in the blade edge. The process of combining these three types of steel is called Tsukurikomi, and is achieved by cutting, folding and reforging, over and over again.

This entire process requires that the various metals be folded and forged as many as 200 times. It is a long and arduous, painstaking process that could

require as much as a full day per fold, and this is just to get the steel ready for the actual process of turning it into a sword.

The steel is then gently hammered into a sword shape, and tempered by pouring cold water onto the steel. However, before this is begun, clay is placed upon the blade edge. This is called Yakibatsuchi. As the blade cools, the clay leaves a decorative imprint on the blade of the sword.

Upon completion, the sword is then

tempered one final time in a bed of high quality charcoal, burning at an even temperature. The process is called Yakiire and is critical to the construction of the sword. Again, at this stage, if the heat is improper, or the blade is not heated evenly along it's entire length, the temper is ruined.

Finally, the sword is sent to be polished by an expert sword polisher, called Togi.

Once the sword was constructed, it was ready to be tested in a process known as

Tameshigeri. The sword was raised and slashed to cut through steel plates, bundles of straw, or even in some cases, condemned criminals. The sword would have to perform flawlessly, executing every required cut with exacting precision, and flawless sharpness.

The sword testers were probably the best at cutting with a sword that the world has ever seen, and their services were not cheap. A sword tester would practice as much as 10000 cuts a day in order to insure his skill with the weapon, and to alleviate the possibility that he was at fault, should the sword

fail the testing process.

In the whole of the sword making period of Japan, there have only been about 17000 Toshiro. Over a period of about 1300 years, this only amounts to about 13 per century, or about 10 in a given lifetime.

Sword Etiquette

Contrary to what is shown in many films and books, Samurai were NOT prone to attacking people with their swords. There are a great many reasons for this, but primarily it was due to the constraints placed upon them by the bushido code. Though the code itself was never actually codified until the 16th century, the precepts of the code are founded in Buddhist teachings and thus were part of the Samurai philosophy since the 7th century when Buddhism was brought to Nippon. The precepts of Jin, Gi, Chu and Rei, generally prevented the Samurai from simply using his sword upon just anyone and at least one documented case of a Samurai, disobeying these precepts and having

been put to death for it has been recorded. This is the famous 47 Ronin incident, in which, the leader of these Ronin, Asano Nagamori drew his shoto, or wakizashi, and struck down the Shogun's chief of protocol, Kira Yoshinaka. He was ordered to commit seppuku (ritual suicide) over the incident. The eight precepts of the Bushido Code are as follows;

Jin - to develop a sympathetic understanding of people

Gi - to preserve the correct ethics

Chu - to show loyalty to one's master

Ko - to respect and to care for one's parents

Rei - to show respect for others

Chi - to enhance wisdom by broadening one's knowledge

Shin - to be truthful at all times

Tei - to care for the aged and those of a humble station

Another reason is the expense of these blades. Many of them were heirlooms

passed down from father to son over many generations, and the samurai would not risk harming such an heirloom for no purpose. Even if the samurai had acquired his sword himself, the expense was so astronomical, that it is unlikely that he had anything in his possession... including his house that was more valuable.

Due to this expense, the samurai often used other weapons in his personal defense, including, the Jitte (Jutte), Gunsen (tessen), Manrikigusari, and female samurai would also use their hair pins, called Kansashi.

In wartime, Halberds, called Naganata, and Nagamaki as well as the Nipponese great bow, called Daikyu, were also used.

The wakizashi was designed as the shoto (small sword) that accompanied the daito (large sword) in the matched pair known as the daisho. The daisho was the badge of the samurai. Tradesmen and craftsmen were not allowed to carry the long katana, but often carried a wakizashi or tanto in their obi. Samurai were often required by etiquette to remove their daito. For example,

samurai would usually leave their katana with an attendant when visiting another's house. However, they were almost never separated from their wakizashi.

Otherwise, the wakizashi and tanto are only different to the katana by virtue of size in regards to the etiquette required of them.

Sword Variants

Tanto. The tanto is a single bladed dagger or knife with a blade length of 12

inches or less. They were often constructed in a fashion similar to the katana, but without the rigorous testing process.

Wakizashi. Also called a shoto, the wakizashi is the counterpart to the katana and together with it makes up the Daisho. They were usually constructed with as much painstaking effort as a katana, but could be cheaply manufactured for the lower classes. The Wakizashi has a blade length of greater than 12 inches, but less than 24 inches.

Chiisagatana. The chiisagatana is often mistaken for a wakizashi, and it is very difficult to tell the two apart. The principle difference comes in the koshirae, or fittings. The fittings of a chiisagatana are identical to the katana, though the blade length is short like the wakizashi. Therefore, the chiisagatana can be used two-handed. It too can be carried as part of the Daisho, and was always constructed with the most painstaking process of the katana.

Katana. The Katana, or Daito was the principle weapon of the Samurai, and possessed a blade length greater than 24

inches. The longest of these weapons, called daikatana, had blades in the range of 32 to 36 inches, creating a sword with a total length nearing 4 feet.

Katana-wari. This weapon was much like a daikatana in length, but had a much heavier blade, and was used solely for chopping through armor in wartime. Due to the weight of the blade, thrusting was unwieldy and therefore never done.

Nodachi. The Japanese great sword was used upon the battlefield usually as an intimidator. They were usually of great

length (6 to 7 feet) and weight (15 to 18 pounds). Most of them were of very low quality, but a few were constructed using the same techniques as a Katana, these were truly frightening weapons.

A glossary of Sword Terms useful to gaming

AIKUCHI - a tanto with no tsuba
(guard)

AOI - hollyhock, commonly used as a
Mon

ARA-NIE - coarse or large nie

ASHI - legs (streaks of nioi pointing
down toward the edge)

ATOBORI - horimono added at a later
date

ATO MEI - signature added at a later
date

AYASUGI - large wavey hada (grain)

BAKUFU - military government of the
Shogun

BO-HI - large or wide groove

BOKKEN - wooden sword for practicing sword kata

BONJI - sanskrit carvings

BO-UTSURI - faint utsuri

BOSHI - temper line in kissaki (point)

BU - Japanese measurement (approx 0.1 inch)

BUKE - military man, samurai

BUSHIDO -the code of the samurai

CHIISAGATANA - short katana

CHIKAI - dark lines that appear in the ji

CHOJI - clove shaped hamon

CHOJI OIL - oil for the care of swords

CHOJI-MIDARE - irregular choji hamon (temper line)

CHOKUTO - prehistoric straight swords

CHU - medium

CHU-KISSAKI - medium sized point
(kissaki)

CHU-SUGUHA straight, medium width
temper line

DAI - great or large

DAI-MEI - student smith signing his
teacher's name

DAIMYO - feudal lord

DAISHO - a matched pair of long and
short swords

DAITO - long sword (over 24 inches)

FUCHI - collar on hilt

FUCHI-KASHIRA - set of hilt collar
(fuchi) and buttcap (kashira)

FUKURA - curve of the ha or edge in

the kissaki (point)

FUKURE - flaw; usually a blister in the steel

FUKURIN - rim cover of a tsuba

FUNAGATA - ship bottom shaped nakago

FUNBARI / FUMBARI - much taper of the blade from the machi to the kissaki

FURISODE - shape of sword tang that resembling the sleeve of a kimono

GAKU-MEI - original signature inlaid in a cut-off (o-suriage) tang

GENDAITO - traditionally forged sword blades by modern smiths

GIMEI - fake signature (mei)

GIN - silver

GOKADEN - the Five Schools of the

Koto period

GOMABASHI - parallel grooves

GUNOME - undulating hamon

GUNOME-MIDARE - irregularly undulating hamon

GUNTO - army or military sword mountings

GYAKU - angled back, reversed

HA - cutting edge

HABAKI - blade collar

HABUCHI - the line of the hamon

HADA - grain in steel, pattern of folding the steel

HAGANE - steel

HAGIRE -edge cracks in the hamon (fatal flaw)

HAKIKAKE -broom swept portions in

the boshi

HAKO BA - box shaped hamon

HAKO-MIDARE - uneven box shaped hamon

HAKO-MUNE - square shaped blade back

HAMACHI - notch at the beginning of the cutting edge

HAMIDASHI - tanto or dagger with a small guard (tsuba)

HAMON - temper pattern along blade edge

HANDACHI - tachi mountings used on a katana or wakizashi

HAZUYA - finger stones used to show the hamon and hada

HI - grooves in the blade

HIRA-MUNE - flat blade backridge

HIRA-TSUKURI / HIRA-ZUKURI - blade without a shinogi (flat blade)

HIRO-SUGUHA - wide, straight temper line (hamon)

HITATSURA - full tempered hamon

HITSU / HITSU-ANA - holes in the tsuba for the kozuka or kogai

HO - kozuka blade

HONAMI - family of sword appraisers

HORIMONO - carvings on sword blades

HOTSURE - stray lines from hamon into the ji

ICHI - one or first

ICHIMAI - one-piece sword construction

ICHIMAI BOSHI - point area (kissaki)
that is fully tempered

IHORI-MUNE - peaked back ridge

IKUBI - boar's neck (a short, wide
kissaki)

INAZUMA - lightning (a type of activity
in the hamon)

ITAME - wood grained hada

ITO - silk or cotton hilt wrapping

ITOMAKI NO TACHI - tachi with top
of saya wrapped with ito

ITO SUGU - thin, thread like hamon

JI - sword surface between the shinogi
and the hamon

JI-GANE - surface steel

JI-HADA - surface pattern of the hada

JINDACHI - tachi

JI-NIE - islands of nie in the ji

JIZO BOSHI - boshi shaped like a priest's head

JUMONJI YARI - a yari with cross pieces

JUYO TOKEN - highly important origami for sword by NBTHK

JUZU - hamon like rosary beads

KABUTO - helmet

KABUTO-GANE - tachi style pommel cap

KABUTO-WARI - helmet breaker

KAEN - flame shaped boshi

KAERI - turnback (refers to the boshi at the mune)

KAI GUNTO - naval sword

KAJI - swordsmith

KAKIHAN - swordsmiths or tsuba makers monogram

KAKU-MUNE - square back ridge

KAMIKAZI - divine wind

KANJI - Japanese characters

KANMURI-OTOSHI - backridge beveled like a naginata

KANTEI - sword appraisal

KAO - carved monogram of swordsmith on tang (nakago)

KASANE - thickness of blade

KASHIRA - sword pommel or buttcap

KATAKIRI - sword with one side flat (no shinogi)

KATANA - sword worn in the obi, cutting edge up

KATANA KAKE - sword stand

KATANA-MEI - signature side that

faces out when worn edge up

KAWAGANE - skin or surface steel

KAZUCHI MONO - mass produced
swords

KEBORI - line carving done on sword
mounts

KEN - straight double edged sword

KENGYO - triangular or pointed
nakago-jiri

KESHO YASURIME - decorative file
marks on nakago

KIJIMATA - pheasant thigh shaped
nakago

KIJIMOMO - pheasant leg shaped
nakago

KIKU - chrysanthemum

KIKUBA - chrysanthemum temperline
(hamon)

KIN - gold

KINKO - soft metal sword fittings (not iron)

KIN-MEI - gold inlay or gold lacquer appraiser's signature

KINZOGAN MEI - same a kin-mei

KINSUJI - golden line (type of activity in hamon)

KINZOGAN-MEI - attribution in gold inlay on nakago

KINSUJI - whitish line along hamon

KIRI - paulownia

KIRI HA - flat sword with both sides beveled to the edge

KIRI KOMI - sword cut or nick on the blade from another sword

KISSAKI - point of blade

KITAE - forging

KIZU - flaw

KO - old or small

KOBUSE - blade constructed with hard steel around a soft core

KO-CHOJI - small choji hamon

KODACHI - small tachi

KODOGU - all the sword fittings except the tsuba

KOGAI - hair pick accessory

KOIGUCHI - the mouth of the scabbard or its fitting

KOJIRI - end of the scabbard

KOKUHO - national treasure class sword

KO-MARU - small round boshi

KO-MIDARE - small irregular hamon

KO-MOKUME - small wood grain hada

KO-NIE - small or fine nie

KO-NIE DEKI - composed of small nie

KOSHIATE - leather suspensors
(hangers) for a sword

KOSHIRAE - sword mountings or
fittings

KOSHI-ZORI - curve of the blade is
near the hilt

KOTO - Old Sword Period (prior to
about 1596)

KOZUKA - handle of accessory knife

KUBIKIRI - small tanto for cutting the
neck or removing heads

KUNI - province

KURIJIRI - rounded nakago jiri

KURIKARA - dragon horimono
(engraving/carving)

KURIKATA - scabbard (saya) fitting for

attaching the sageo

KUZURE - crumbling or disintegrating

KWAIKEN - short knife carried by women

MACHI - notches at the start of the ha and mune

MACHI-OKURI - blade shortened by moving up the ha-machi and mune-machi

MARU - round

MARU-DOME - round groove ending

MARU-MUNE - round mune

MASAME - straight grain (hada)

MEI - swordsmith's signature

MEIBUTSU - famous sword

MEKUGI - sword peg

MEKUGI-ANA - hole for mekugi

MEMPO - face guard or mask

MENUKI - hilt ornaments

MIDARE - irregular, uneven temperline
(hamon)

MIDARE-KOMI - uneven pattern in
boshi

MIHABA - width of sword blade at the
machi

MIMIGATA - ear shaped hamon

MITOKOROMONO - matching set of
kozuka, kogai and menuki

MITSU KADO - point where yokote,
shinogi and ko-shinogi meet

MITSU-MUNE - three-sided mune

MIZUKAGE - hazy line in ji commonly
due to re-tempering

MOKKO - four lobe shaped (a tsuba
shape)

MOKUME - burl like hada

MON - family crest

MONOUCHI - main cutting portion of blade (first six inches from kissaki)

MOROHA - double-edged sword

MOTO-HABA - blade width near habaki

MOTO-KASANE - blade thickness

MU - empty or nothing

MUJI - no visible grain

MUMEI - no signature (unsigned blade)

MUNE - back ridge of sword blade

MUNEMACHI - notch at start of mune

MUNEYAKI - regions of temper along the mune

MU-SORI - no curvature

N.B.T.H.K. - Nihon Bijutsu Token

Hozon Kai (sword preservation group)

NAGAMAKI - halberd weapon
mounted as a sword

NAGASA - blade length (from tip of
kissaki to munemachi)

NAGINATA - halberd

NAKAGO - sword tang

NAMBAN TETSU - foreign steel

NANAKO - raised dimpling (fish roe)

NAOSHI - corrected or repaired

NENGO - Japanese era

NIE - bright crystals in hamon or ji

NIE-DEKI - hamon done in nie

NIKU - meat (blade having lots of
fullness)

NIOI - cloud like hamon

NIOI-DEKI - composed of nioi

NODACHI - large tachi worn by high
officials

NOTARE - wave like hamon

NOTARE-MIDARE - irregular wave like hamon

N.T.H.K.. - Nihon Token Hozon Kai
(sword appraisal group)

NUNOME - overlay metal-work

O - large

OBI - belt sash

O-CHOJI - large choji hamon

O-DACHI - very long sword (over 30 inches)

O-KISSAKI - large kissaki

O-MIDARE - large irregular hamon

OMOTE - signature side of the nakago

O-NIE - large nie

O-NOTARE - large wave patterned hamon

ORIGAMI - appraisal certificate

ORIKAESHI MEI - folded signature

OROSHIGANE - specially processed steel for making swords

O-SEPPA - large seppa (usually on tachi)

OSHIGATA - rubbing of the signature on the nakago

O-SURIAGE - a shortened tang with the signature removed

SAGEO - cord used for tying the saya to the obi

SAGURI - catch-hook on saya

SAIHA/SAIJIN - retempered sword

SAKA - slanted

SAKI - tip or point

SAKI-HABA - blade width at yokote

SAKI ZORI - curvature in the top third of the blade

SAKU - made

SAME' - rayskin used for tsuka (handle) covering

SAMURAI - Japanese warrior or the warrior class

SANBONSUGI - "three cedars" (hamon with repeating three peaks)

SAN-MAI - three-piece sword construction

SAYA - sword scabbard

SAYAGAKI - attribution on a plain wood scabbard

SAYAGUCHI - mouth of the scabbard (koi-guchi)

SAYASHI - scabbard maker

SEKI-GANE - soft metal plugs in the

tsuka hitsu-ana

SEPPA - washers or spacers

SHAKU - Japanese unit of measure
approximately one foot

SHAKUDO - copper and gold alloy
used for sword fittings

SHIBUICHI - copper and silver alloy
used for sword fittings

SHIKOMI-ZUE - sword cane

SHINAE - ripples in steel due to
bending of blade

SHINAI - bamboo sword used in Kendo

SHINGANE - soft core steel

SHINOGI - ridgeline of the blade

SHINOGI-JI - sword flat between the
mune and shinogi

SHINOGI-ZUKURI - sword with
shinogi

SHIN-SHINTO - New-New Sword
Period (1781 to 1868)

SHINTO - New Sword Period (1596 to
1781)

SHIRASAYA - plain wood storage
scabbard

SHITODOME - small collars in the
kurikata and/or kashira

SHOBU ZUKURI - blade where
shinogi goes to the tip of the kissaki (no
yokote)

SHOGUN - supreme military leader

SHOTO - short sword (between 12 and
24 inches)

SHOWATO - sword made during the
Showa Era (usually refers to low quality
blades)

SHUMEI - red lacquer signature

SHURIKEN - small throwing knife

SORI - curvature

SUDARE-BA - bamboo blinds effects
in hamon

SUE - late or later

SUGATA - shape of sword blade

SUGUHA - straight temper line

SUKASHI - cut out

SUN - Japanese measure, approx. one
inch

SUNAGASHI - activity in hamon like
brushed sand

SURIAGE - shortened tang

TACHI - long sword worn with cutting-
edge down

TACHI-MEI - signature facing away
from body when worn edge down

TAKABORI - high relief carving

TAKANOHA - hawk feather style of yasurime

TAMAHAGANE - raw steel for making swords

TAMESHIGIRI - cutting test

TAMESHI-MEI - cutting test inscription

TANAGO - fish belly shaped nakago

TANAGO-BARA - fish belly shaped nakago

TANTO - dagger or knife with blade less than 12 inches

TATARA - smith's smelter for making sword steel

TO - sword

TOBIYAKI - islands of tempering in the ji

TOGARI - pointed

TOGI - sword polish or polisher

TORAN - high wave like hamon

TORII-ZORI - sword curve in the middle of the blade

TSUBA - sword guard

TSUCHI - small hammer/awl for removing mekugi

TSUKA - sword handle

TSUKA-GUCHI - mouth of handle

TSUKA-ITO - handle wrapping or tape

TSUKAMAKI - art of wrapping the handle of a sword

TSUKURI / ZUKURI - sword

TSUKURU - made by or produced by

TSUNAGI - wooden sword blade to display fittings

TSURUGI - double edged, straight

sword

UBU - original, complete, unaltered tang
(nakago)

UCHIGATANA - fighting katana

UCHIKO - fine powder used to clean
sword blades

UCHIZORI - curved inward

UMABARI - horse needle

UMA-HA - horse teeth hamon

UMEGANE - plug used to repair kizu

URA - side of the nakago facing toward
the body

URA-MEI - signed on the ura (usually
the date)

UTSURI - reflection of temperline in ji

WAKIZASHI - short sword (blade

between 12 and 24 inches)

WARE - opening in the steel

WARI-BASHI / WARI-KOGAI - chopsticks

YAKI DASHI - straight temperline near the hamachi

YA-HAZU - arrow notch shaped hamon

YAKIBA - hardened, tempered sword edge

YAKIDASHI - hamon beginning just above the ha-machi

YAKIHABA - width of yakiba

YAKI-IRE - fast quenching of sword (tempering)

YAKIZUME - temperline in boshi with no turnback

YANONE - arrow head

YARI - spear

YASURIME - file marks on nakago

YOKOTE - line between ji and kissaki

YOROIDOSHI - armor piercing tanto

ZOGAN - inlay

ZUKURI - sword

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